

Acton Community Housing Corporation

Nancy Tavernier, Chairman

TOWN OF ACTON

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Board of Selectmen
Town of Acton
Acton, MA

Dear Board members:

On July 21, the Acton Community Housing Corporation (ACHC) voted to support the Local Initiative Program (LIP) application from Westchester Company (Stephan Marsh, developer) for an affordable housing development at 139 Prospect St., known as Blanchard Place.

We were first approached by Steve in February to discuss conceptual plans for a small development on the site. We encouraged them to work out some ideas on design and size of the project and bring them back to us. In April, ACHC held a public information meeting on the proposal, which was attended by the neighborhood and interested town board members. At that meeting, the developer proposed a 16 unit development in 3 multi-family buildings. They proposed one 4-unit building, in a farmhouse style, facing the street and two 6-unit buildings perpendicular to the street, in a traditional townhouse design.

There were concerns expressed by both ACHC and the neighborhood about the density of the site and the design of the townhouse units. We requested a reduction in units, both number and bedroom size, and a more attractive townhouse design. Westchester Company was very responsive to our requests and brought back a reduced plan for 12 units including two 2-BR units and a rearrangement of the buildings on the site to accommodate the most important of the Conservation Commission concerns, the protection of the vernal pool.

ACHC has reviewed the full designs for each of the buildings. The farmhouse design is very attractive, is consistent with the immediate neighborhood, and appropriate to the historic significance of the site. The design for the second building has been improved by the reduction in height of the two end units, creating a step-up design for the whole building. The 4 unit building in the rear is the original townhouse design with 2 fewer units and the building is being placed parallel to the road which creates a courtyard type arrangement for the 3 buildings. The height of the rear building is 36 feet, not the most

desirable, but its placement at the rear of the property should mitigate the esthetic concerns to some degree.

ACHC has worked throughout the process with Steve Marsh who has demonstrated a willingness to work in a collaborative approach by listening to suggestions and concerns and then acting on them. We are pleased that they are using the DHCD LIP approval process. The LIP process is known as a "friendly Chapter 40B." The developer is very aware of the need to compromise with the Town in order to get the required signatures up front. Endorsing this proposal sends a signal to developers that they may find a more welcoming environment under LIP than MassHousing so long as there is a dialogue with the Town. We are also pleased that he is using a well-known Chapter 40B consultant, Ed Marchant, to guide him through the financial aspects of the project.

Under LIP, the Board of Selectmen and the ACHC share the initial local approval responsibility and both must sign the application before it can be filed with the DHCD. ACHC has voted to do that. The developers will continue to meet with other boards once the application is signed and the project is a reality. They are still required to file for a comprehensive permit through the ZBA which will be done just as soon as the DHCD grants approval. At that time, all the town boards will be solicited for official comments and public hearings will be held. In ACHC's opinion, the reward for any developer's willingness to use LIP should be an expedited process and we are hopeful that sufficient groundwork has been laid to allow that to happen. This is less costly to all involved. Many concessions have already been made by the developers, primarily on the issue of design and density.

ACHC is very pleased with the affordable unit selling prices as stated in the Pro Forma. The 2 bedroom unit is projected to sell for \$145,000 and the 3-BR units at \$159,900. These contrast with the recent Franklin Place prices for affordable 3-BR units at \$195,000 and the Fort Pond Brook units at \$179,000. The HUD current Area Median Income (AMI) statistics for the Boston metropolitan area would allow a family of three to purchase the 2-BR unit with an income at 60-70% of the AMI (\$45,000) and a family of four to purchase the 3-BR unit at a maximum household income of \$50,000, also at 60-70% of the AMI. These are really exceptional offerings at this price. We congratulate the developer and his team for targeting this income group.

In the LIP application, the developer asks for a waiver of the sewer betterment for the three affordable units. ACHC has no opinion on the waiver request at this time and wish to note that our signature on the application should not imply support for that request.

Residents of the Prospect St. neighborhood have stated their concerns about wetlands and flooding issues that exist in the area currently, possibly as a result of the impact other major construction projects on Prospect Street. The Conservation Commission has approved the Notice of Intent subject to an Order of Conditions. The ACHC is committed to the provision of affordable housing but only if it does not sacrifice the environment, health, or safety of the Town. We have observed the willingness of the developer to address these concerns and to hire specialized consultants to thoroughly review the neighborhood and Conservation Commission issues. It is possible that the area's environment will actually be enhanced by the attention given as a result of this proposal,

particularly the vernal pool, which is in serious need of protection and restoration. It is also possible the proposed drainage system for the development may improve the overall groundwater flow in the area. These possibilities lie outside ACHC's area of review, they are just observations on our part.

We are confident Westchester Company will continue to work with the neighborhood to address their concerns throughout the process. ACHC is willing to facilitate opportunities for the developer to communicate with the neighbors. The developer has been very responsive throughout the process.

In conclusion, the ACHC urges the Selectmen to endorse Blanchard Place and to authorize the Chairman to sign the application. It is especially appropriate for the Selectmen to embrace the LIP approach at a time when the Town is developing a joint policy statement for comprehensive permits which will propose strategies to facilitate affordable housing while honoring the tradition of local approval. If there is a way to accomplish the goal of increased affordable housing without rancor, we all will benefit from the process.

Thank you for your continued leadership and support for affordable housing.

Sincerely,

Nancy Tavernier, Chair
Acton Community Housing Corporation

Cc Westchester Company